



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

GREAT-GRANDMOTHER'S FAVORITE NOVEL

As the student of history looks back a century he sees the year eighteen thirteen as the twelve-month of Vittoria and Leipsic in the old world, and of Lake Erie in the new. James Madison occupied the White House; George the Third misgoverned England, and Napoleon, undiscouraged by his Russian fiasco, was trying to rule most of the rest of Europe. Constable and Wilkie were the foremost painters of the day; Schubert and Weber the composers of widest appeal. The names of Stephenson and Ampère stood premier in the field of scientific endeavor, and the theatre's most applauded ones were the oddly differing Kean and Grimaldi. As to British letters they seemed "between seasons", in spite of the appearance of the opening cantos of *Childe Harold* in the February of eighteen twelve and of the rich promise of a Shelley yet-to-be held between the drab covers of the just published *Queen Mab*. Scott's metrical romances had fallen from the high estate of *The Lady of the Lake* and *Marmion* to the dull levels of *Rokeby* and *Lord of the Isles*, while the unfinished manuscript of *Waverly* yet lay half-forgotten in the litter of an Abbotsford drawer. Dickens, Thackeray, and Browning were babes in arms; Tennyson was but five, Keats not yet twenty, and the recently appointed Lauriate, Mr. Southey, was not, of course, writing anything inspiring for contemporary "centre-tables", where, side by side, reposed Campbell's *Gertrude of Wyoming* and the *Cælebs in Search of a Wife* from the estimable pen of Hannah More.

At such a moment came *Pride and Prejudice*, which Disraeli was to admit he had read seventeen times, and of which Professor Saintsbury was to write: "It is the most perfect and most eminently quintessential of Miss Austen's works."

First composed in seventeen ninety-six, when the author was barely twenty-one, revised and finished full fifteen years later, while she lived in Chawton, and published only four years before her passing, it set a new high-water mark in the literature of the story. What a cast of characters were then and there put forward on the stage of the novel-readers of great-grandmother's

heyday: Mr. Bennett, amiable and peace-loving, with that querulous and ambitious wife of his, so exquisitely amusing; Darcy, wealthy, dignified and generally "excellent"; Wickham the unprincipled; Elizabeth the lively and wholly charming; and that small-souled Collins, ineffable, immortal, better than anything in all Addison and as good as Tom Fielding's best. Here was as long a step in the leading of English literature back to life and naturalness from the formal unrealities of the "classic" era as was ever *The Task* or *The Cottar's Saturday Night*.

The deadening influence of classicism, however, had not fallen on English prose as it had on English poetry and even less had it affected prose fiction. While the versifiers of the period of Pope had busied themselves to "smooth and inlay, clip and fit", Addison had been picturing forth Sir Roger de Coverley, the country squire of the early seventeen hundreds and the broad-minded gentleman of all time,—the political philosopher, the leisurely journalist, the kindly "Spectator". Swift's cruel and embittered genius had merged eternal truth in the turbulent sea of temporary policy, but almost at the same instant Defoe had so succeeded in making the thing that is not seem as the thing that is that even to-day one finds many a reader convinced of the complete truth of *Robinson Crusoe* and undoubtedly accepting the *Journal of the Plague Year* as, what it purports to be, the chronicle of an eye-witness to those horrors. Then came self-conscious Sterne, but *My Uncle Toby* was nevertheless a character of no single age; wash from him the author's veneer of innuendo and mawkishness and he is the eternal individual. Goldsmith's Vicar, if less convincing, yet lived and moved and had his literary being in the pages of a story which is the first genuine tale of domestic life in the tongue. If Richardson was not "compelling", as Charles Anderson Dana used to say, yet his fellow novelists, Smollett and Fielding, were realistic enough to satisfy the most exacting.

After that triumvirate a change came over the spirit of the dream of the story: new influences began to work havoc with naturalness. Dr. Johnson's *Rasselas* is little more than a literary curiosity. Whatever may be said of its philosophy,

both matter and manner were Augustan in spirit, stilted and artificial. Then Horace Walpole, cynic and coxcomb, in his *Castle of Otranto*, invented the romantic tale of sighing portraits, bleeding statues, and clanking chains. Ten years more and Anne Radcliffe's *Udolpho* and "Monk" Lewis's imaginings went further even than this. Secret vaults, sliding panels, and unguessed trap-doors became as common as front stairs and chamber closets. Mysterious, sin-stained brunettes, of the type of Byron's Lara were to be met with as often as matter-of-fact tradesmen from just around the corner. Impenetrable forests, wild sunsets, and melancholy dawns were accepted as the natural and usual concomitants of every countryside and day. Such "Tales of Terror" have their fascination for all in some moods, and for a few always. The student cannot but appreciate their influence on the later work of such as Hawthorne and Poe and Stevenson, as well as Scott and Coleridge. *Thrawn Janet* and *Christabel*, for instance, are born of just such long-passed ancestry. But how ridiculously unlike life it all was! Take a specimen page of Lewis's *Bravo of Venice* and compare it with Jane Austen or George Eliot, with Thackeray or Dickens, and one sees how real was the need, in prose fiction as in verse, of a return to nature:—

It was evening. Multitudes of light clouds, partially illuminated by the moonbeams, overspread the horizon, and through them floated the moon in tranquil majesty, while her splendor was reflected by every wave of the Adriatic Sea. All was hushed around; gently was the water rippled by the night wind; gently did the night wind sigh through the Colonnades of Venice.

It was midnight; and still sat a stranger, solitary and sad, on the border of the great canal. Now with a glance he measured the battlements and proud towers of the city; and now he fixed his melancholy eyes upon the waters with a vacant stare. At length he spoke:—

"Wretch that I am, whither shall I go? Here I sit in Venice, and what would it avail me to wander further? What will become of me? All now slumber, save myself! The Doge rests on his couch of down; the beggar's head presses the straw pillow; but for *me* there is no bed except the cold, damp earth! There is no gondolier so wretched

but he knows where to find work by day and shelter by night—while I—while I—Oh! dreadful is the destiny of which I am made the sport!”

He began to examine for the twentieth time the pockets of his tattered garments. “No! not one paolo, by heavens!—and I hunger almost to death!”

He unsheathed his sword; he waved it in the moonshine, and sighed, as he marked the glittering of the steel.

“No, no, my old true companion, thou and I must never part. Mine thou shalt remain though I starve for it. Oh, was not that a golden time when Valeria gave thee to me, and when she threw the belt over my shoulder, I kissed thee and Valeria? She has deserted us for another world, but thou and I will never part in this.”

He wiped away a drop which hung from his eyelid.

“Pshaw! ’twas not a tear; the night wind is sharp and bitter, and makes the eyes water; but as for *tears*—Absurd! my weeping days are over.”

And as he spoke the unfortunate (for such by his discourse and situation he appeared to be) dashed his forehead against the earth, and his lips were already unclosed to curse the hour which gave him being, when he seemed suddenly to recollect himself. He rested his head on his elbow, and sang mournfully the burthen of a song which had delighted his childhood in the castle of his ancestors.

Two women led the story back from such tinsel unrealities to common sense. Maria Edgeworth, so highly esteemed by Walter Scott, eight years older than Jane Austen and outliving her thirty-two years, sounded not at all uncertainly the note of actuality and made for herself a high place among those who have pictured Irish life and character; but with all this she was far excelled by her greater sister story-teller.

Jane Austen told the tale of the better middle-class English life; the comedy of manners. It is a restricted subject, but she covered it so perfectly that there can be no just question as to her genius. She was possessed of a style wholly unconscious and lucidly clear; her power of satire was charming, gentle, and genteel, yet telling and true; her wit was as genuine as it was delicate, and she was gifted with a wonderfully clear penetration. Great for all this, Jane Austen is yet greater in that she was as truly a literary pioneer as was either Cowper or Burns. The

heroine of fiction, when she began to write, was an ultra-refined young woman, physically weak and mentally almost imbecile, who wept and fainted and had hysterics up to the final chapter. *Sense and Sensibility* smiled this young lady out of existence, even as *Northanger Abbey* laughed off the boards all the ridiculous sensationalism of the Radcliffe-Walpole sort.

From a literary point of view, Miss Austen's short life may be held to lie between the periods respectively dominated by Burns and Byron. Her work fell within only eight years,—one period of three and another, after an interval, of five,—yet in that she gave for our enjoying an even half-dozen stories of first rank and not a single failure. Hers was the quietest sort of a quiet life, far removed from the work-a-day world, with not one happening of romantic sort to ruffle the placid months; a rare visit to Bath was a dissipation to be dreamed of before and after. The author of *Pride and Prejudice* was eighteen when the Terror drenched France with the blood of its best, and she died some twenty-five months after Waterloo had changed all contemporary history, yet there sounds no note of any of this in what she wrote. She was born at Steventon, in Hampshire, on the twelfth of December, seventeen seventy-five, and as her father was a clergyman of some literary attainments she was given rather more education than usual for girls of a period when it was not quite "nice" for a young woman to know much. *Cranford* suggests such days as she must have known, or, better still, turn to her own heroines for pictures of those post-chaise times when well-bred folks prided themselves on the ability to talk like copybooks.

The Austen parsonage was a square, old-fashioned house, set in a square, old-fashioned garden given over to such precise cultivation as one glimpses in Mr. Dobson's delightful *A Gentleman of the Old School*. The sloping meadows that lay about were the floor of a shallow valley, cut by hedgerows and bounded by not lofty hills. Here was nothing in all nature of a sort to stir imaginings such as one feels in the wild, even primeval Haworth land of the Brontës, or in the Hardy and Philpotts shires; it was satisfying but not stirring, though people, not nature, were to inspire that affectionate, unselfish girl of rich

coloring, dark hair, and brown eyes,—she of good sense, unwearied patience, and undulled brightness. Her hours were filled with playing on the pianoforte or harp, with copying indifferent drawings or gilding flowerpots, with netting gloves or hemming veils; with pottering about the garden, or, perhaps, pattens and all, braving the mud of the country lanes and the frowns of Mrs. Grundy quite as did her own Elizabeth Bennett. As to her writing, it was done at a diminutive desk set in the sunny bay of the parsonage parlor, where every chance caller could interrupt and distract; though they never guessed so much, since the sprightly little authoress invariably concealed her neatly written pages with a piece of fancy work, kept ready at hand for just such use.

Mr. Hugh Thomson's frontispiece to *Pride and Prejudice* seems somehow to suggest "the gentle Jane" at that slender-legged desk of hers. The diminutive foot-stool at the side of the harp-backed chair, the flowers set on the window ledge within the muslin curtains, the quill pen balanced across the Dresden-like inkwell,—it all seems a part of Chawton, say, if not actually photographic of Steventon parsonage. And the seated girl, in the short-waisted gown and a suggestion of little curls over her ears, might be Miss Austen's self as well as another, looking out from that window across smooth lawns to leafy parks, everything in nature as trim and prim, as proper and discreet as Hampshire folk themselves.

Yet that window gave upon all a novelist's world, and if it seem a narrow outlook upon life from which to draw it accurately, was not the art greater to create from it scenes so convincing and alluring? Goldwin Smith has aptly summarized it: "Metaphor has been exhausted in depicting the perfection of that art, combined, as it must be combined, if fair view be taken, with the narrowness of her field." Art and humanity were inborn in this première picturer of still life; or, to put it another way, fidelity and sympathy were traits native to her every thought and expression. Her pen touched nothing that it did not forthwith stand out as distinct as life itself, no matter how dull or prosy it had seemed before that apotheosis. A stretch of gray dawn reaching up to a bit of blue sky makes a tame picture

save when an exceedingly great artist paints it, and yet, once handled by the master, the page or canvas holds its own in worth and interest with no matter what portrayal of the heroic and unusual. As was said by Brunetière, to condense his paragraph to a sentence, a dewdrop is as perfect as a star.

Miss Austen drew the little things,—the average men and women. She sounded no deep chords, moved to no passions; there were no glaring effects among the colors on her palette. But, if she painted in drabs and browns, shade and tone were none the less charming both in delicacy and truth; she is the precisionist in painting. Stroke after stroke is traced, trivial, unenforced, effortless, and the result is a miniature,—a miniature of the Meissonier sort, however, not such as were Cosway's; such miniature as could have been painted only by one whose whole heart was in the labor, and into whose life came little to distract completest attention from the ivory-pure surface on which the picture was growing.

Not less than genius can make the commonplace seem eventful, if not actually important, but the doing of this was itself a commonplace to Jane Austen. Scott and Macaulay have both borne testimony to this. The essayist writes:—

Shakespeare had neither equal nor second. But among the writers who have approached nearest to the manner of the great master, we have no hesitation in placing Jane Austen. She has given us a multitude of characters, all, in a certain sense, commonplace, such as we meet every day. Yet they are all as perfectly discriminated from each other as if they were the most eccentric of human beings.

Scott says much the same thing in quite as characteristic a way:—

That young lady had a talent for describing the involvements, feelings and characters of ordinary life, which is to me the most wonderful I have ever met with. The big bow-wow I can do myself like anyone going; but the exquisite touch, which renders commonplace things and characters interesting from the truth of the description and the sentiment, is denied me.

It was Scott, too, who, at another time, remarked: "Miss Austen has given us portraits of real society which I hold

infinitely superior to anything vain man has produced of a like nature."

Such tributes are many. Their name is legion who avow themselves "Janites". Cardinal Newman said that he read at least two of Miss Austen's novels once every year for the sake of his style. Dr. W. J. Dawson, referring to her as "a true immortal", adds "and supreme mistress of comedy", which is implied again in Goldwin Smith's dictum that she could have drawn Dame Quickly or Juliet's Nurse had she thought to. Augustine Birrell places her ahead of both Brontë and Eliot; Arlo Bates calls her the greatest woman novelist; Guizot goes a step further in ranking her the first of all novelists, and Professor Saintsbury caps the climax in saying that he would undertake to find another Homer before another Jane.

Steventon, Southampton, Bath, Chawton, and Winchester,—that is the whole external setting to Miss Austen's brief story of forty-two years. *Sense and Sensibility*, published in 1811, had been written fourteen years earlier, when she was twenty-two; *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) had been declined when she was twenty-one. Then came *Mansfield Park* (1814), with a hero and heroine somewhat insipid, if you choose, but with at least one matchless scene, that of the rehearsal, and then *Emma* (1816), in which the author declared she had drawn a heroine so much to her own liking that no one else could possibly care for her; a judgment, be it added, that was sadly at fault, for the largeness and variety of the story has given it full warrant to dispute with *Pride and Prejudice* itself the honor of first rank in the too-short list of titles which build up the "Austenians" bible. All of these novels were issued anonymously, the publishers' official avowal of their creator's identity not being made till the year following her death, when also appeared (1818) over her own name, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, that tale of Bath which, albeit faint in tone and not so potent in its interest as the other stories, is yet delicate to the point of charming and wholly in keeping. The *Abbey*, sold years earlier for ten pounds but left neglected in the unappreciative purchaser's desk until the writer's brother bought it back, is the story which Sir Walter liked best of all, while Macaulay declared it was worth

all Pliny and Dickens put together. Certainly in freshness and humor, completeness and finish, it is a joy forever.

Three, and perhaps four, of these stories were written with no idea that they would ever be published. Jane wrote because "it was in her", quite as did Scott, though her creative power was of a wholly different order from that with which the Wizard of the North captivated his thousands of readers. Miss Austen left few memorable scenes and no Homeric struggles; she bequeathed to posterity just people, whom it is easier to understand than to describe, for they evolve themselves, and so tell their own stories. In this their literary parent bears close comparison with Thackeray. She has kindness of satire, too, and her humor is full as salty, albeit that same is rather apt to suggest Joseph Addison, for it holds his demureness, an identical lightness of touch, and quite the same repression of what in less gifted hands had sounded as unpleasantly loud tones. As to pathos,—and with Thackeray again in mind,—the woman falls far behind, though it is to be remembered that she lived and wrote when young ladies never dreamed of laying bare their inmost thoughts and selves as two out of every three present-day tale-tellers hasten to do; but the advantage comes to her side of the ledger again when characterization merges into caricature, for she pictures foibles far more gently than "William Makepeace Goliath", though not a whit less mercilessly in the final estimate. How the quiet little daughter of a country parson did love to roast and carve a fool! She could out-Addison Addison there. The snobbish Collins, the horribly true Mrs. Bennett with her match-making soul,—where in literature are better figure-pieces of the sort than these?

Thus called back to *Pride and Prejudice* one cannot but quote Saintsbury's deserved tribute to the character in that story who is most loved and will be longest remembered,—the ever delightful Elizabeth. He says :—

In the novels of the last hundred years there are vast numbers of young ladies with whom it might be a pleasure to fall in love; there are at least five of whom, as it seems to me, no man of taste and spirit can help doing so. Their names are, in chronological order, Elizabeth Bennett, Diana

Vernon, Argemone Lavington, Beatrix Esmond, and Barbara Grant. I should have been most in love with Beatrix and Argemone; I should, I think, for mere occasional companionship, have preferred Diana and Barbara. But to live with and to marry, I do not know that any one of the four can come into competition with Elizabeth.

When, on July 24th, 1817, Miss Austen laid by forever that magic pen,—she was then living in Winchester, in whose long cathedral aisle she was buried three days later,—she had made, perhaps, thirty-five hundred dollars. She had lacked appreciation while living; Maria Edgeworth and Fanny Burney were ranked far above her in those days, but she had erected a pedestal on which to-day she stands securely. In the history of the English novel she is one of the important because one of the indicative figures, and it is her perfect truth to life that makes her of primary worth. To write of men and women who are not extraordinary mentally, morally, or intellectually, to set them on a narrow stage and involve them in no striking situations, and yet never to fail to discriminate them the one from the other as distinctly and unerringly as though we had known them personally and for years, this is the closest possible literary approach to truth,—and the highest genius is the genius which makes the closest approach to truth.

WARWICK JAMES PRICE.

Philadelphia, Penn.